

Obstetricians and Legal Abortions in San Francisco

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A STUDY WAS CARRIED OUT to determine the attitudes, the current practices with respect to methods and fees, and the logistics of legal abortion as conducted by obstetricians engaged in private practice in the city of San Francisco.

During 1970 in the city of San Francisco, 7973 abortions were performed, and the ratio of abortions to live births was 532:1000. This contrasts with 4 abortions to 1000 live births reported to the California Bureau of Statistics for San Francisco in 1969.* In 1969, 60 percent of all abortions in California were done in the San Francisco Bay Statistical Area (a nine county area as designated by the California Bureau of Maternal and Child Health) and the ratio of abortions to live births was 115:1000.¹ In 1970, this same area reported only 35 percent of the state's therapeutic abortions yet the ratio increased to 254:1000.¹ Seventeen hospitals in the state recorded more than 1000 therapeutic abortions each in 1970.¹ Four of these hospitals were in the city of San Francisco, contributing significantly to the dramatic 130-fold reported increase in the city's abortions.

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At the time the article was written the first three authors were second year medical students, Class of 1974. Dr. Colman is Assistant Professor of Psychiatry in Residence.

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*Due to possible confusion between the Statistics Bureau and city hospitals it is thought that this reported figure is below the actual number performed in 1969.

Method of Survey

An initial count of all the physicians practicing the speciality of obstetrics and gynecology in the city of San Francisco was obtained through the San Francisco Medical Society directory, the San Francisco telephone directory, and information from private patients and hospitals. The total was 175. Deducted from the list were all specialists who did not consider their practice to be primarily concerned with private patients—33 residents, 25 physicians on the full time teaching and clinical staffs of the University of California and Kaiser Hospitals, nine physicians who had retired and four who had left their San Francisco practices. The remaining 104 obstetricians and gynecologists in private practice were questioned by phone over an eight-week period in the summer of 1971. The questioner (B.B.) identified himself as a medical student studying therapeutic abortion practices in San Francisco. He then asked the physicians if they performed therapeutic abortion as part of their medical practice. Those who said they did were asked the remaining questions. Their responses made up the data of this study. (If, as sometimes happened, they did not have a definite answer to a question, the record in the data was "no opinion" or "no report.")

Of the 104 surveyed, eight were women and 96 were men. Five were Chinese (four of whom were women), six were black and ten had Spanish surnames. The remaining 83 were Caucasian.

Results

To the question, "Do you do therapeutic abortions?" 72 or 69.2 percent of the 104 responded "yes," and the responses as related to ethnic background were as follows:

	Yes	No
Black	6	0
Spanish surname	2	8
Chinese	1	4
Caucasian	63	20

The following distribution of responses to nine other questions put to the 72 obstetricians in private practice who stated that they performed legal abortions was recorded:

Question		Yes		No		No opinion	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. Do you utilize aminocentesis and saline injections?		57	79	15	21	0	
2. Do you believe a psychiatric consultation is necessary for all women?		4	5.5	67	93	1	1.5
3. Do you believe in abortion on request?		52	72	18	25	2	3
4. What is the approximate number of therapeutic abortions you perform in an average month?		37	51	20	28	8	11
		4	5.5	3	4.5		
5. What do you charge for a therapeutic dilatation and evacuation?		14	20	32	44	16	22
		4	5.5				
		3	4.5	3	4.5		
6. Do you perform the procedure on an inpatient or on a "come and go" basis?		23	32	7	10		
		13	18	29	40		
7. What is the approximate percentage of your therapeutic abortion patients sent to you through a referral agency?		25	35	17	23.5	16	22
		8	11	6	8.5		

8. How long have you been performing therapeutic abortions?

2 years	Since 1967	Before 1967	No report
No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %
7 10	27 37.5	34 47	4 5.5

9. What proportion of your therapeutic abortion patients are on Medi-Cal?

25%	26-50%	51-75%	76%	Do not know or no report
No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %
15 21	24 33	11 15	12 17	10 14

Comments: The legal abortions performed in private practice in San Francisco during 1970-71 were done by 69 percent of the practicing obstetricians in that city. Seventy-nine percent of these physicians will perform amniocentesis and hypertonic saline solution injection for the induction of abortion past the 12th week of gestation. Of the physicians who state that they do not do abortions, 40 percent qualified their answers with statements like, "No, but I refer elsewhere," or "I work through a Catholic hospital and cannot do them," or "I do them only for medical reasons."

Ninety-three percent of the obstetricians performing abortions responded that they do not feel a psychiatric visit is necessary for all women. When asked whether they believe in abortion on request, 72 percent responded yes. Of those responding that they did not, however, 60 percent said that they do approve of abortions if they are agreed upon by both the patient and her physician. Thus, well over 72 percent of the physicians said that they believe therapeutic abortions should be performed when requested by the patient and approved by her physician.

Abortion cases are spread fairly evenly among the obstetricians in private practice, as indicated by the fact that more than 50 percent of the physicians perform five or fewer abortions per month. There are a few physicians performing more than 20 a month. (Of the two general practitioners, not included in this study, who perform abortions in San Francisco, one does more than 150 abortions a month.) The average fee is \$185, with 20 percent of physicians charging between \$100 and \$150. There are currently four physicians charging \$100 and four physicians charging \$300. Also, none of those charging over \$250 will perform abortion by amniocentesis. The trend is toward reducing the charges.

Medical acceptability of abortion as a "come and go" procedure is rapidly increasing in San Francisco with more than 58 percent of the private physicians performing at least half of the procedures on this basis. It was indicated that one common factor preventing this proportion from rising faster is the refusal of most San Francisco private hospitals to permit abortions of that order in their facilities. The general comment from most of the obstetricians contacted was that they would do more "come and go" operations if they were permitted to do so.

There was a disparity between the black obstetricians' willingness to do abortion and that

of the Spanish surname and Chinese physicians—all of six Blacks, two of ten with Spanish name, and one of five Chinese. None of the Spanish surname or Chinese obstetricians who would perform therapeutic abortions would do it by amniocentesis.

The abortion-to-delivery ratio in the city of San Francisco (532 to 1000 live births) is more than three times California's average ratio of 172 to 1000.

REFERENCE

1. Jackson EW, Tashiro M, Cunningham GC: Therapeutic abortions in California. *Calif Med* 115:28-33, Jul 1971

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